

DIABOLO'S LOOP

Or How I Became the Sensation of the Century

By

Howard Burman

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Late one evening toward the end of June, shortly after returning to the United States from a highly successful European tour, Diavolo, “the sensation of the age,” was killed in an ironic accident.

This is the story of how that irony came about.



Robert Vandervoort

one

In which Vandervoort gets the bad news.

STEINWAY AND SONS IN FINANCIAL SLUMP

Company Admits 1896
Their Worst Year

Worthless Investments Are
Said to Be the Cause.

According to a union spokesman the company has invested in doubtful or worthless enterprises such as the Astoria Homestead Company, the Irving Place Theatre, and the Daimler Motor Company. When piano making was flourishing, very few noticed or cared; but during the current depression, the strain of these other investments is indisputable.

That day. Let's just say what appeared to be the worst of days was actually the best of days, although it would be some time before I figured that out.

Vandervoort shows up for work a few minutes before 5:30 on a frosty November morning having walked the twelve blocks from his apartment. He stores his lunch pail in his locker, changes into his work clothes.

Why they started that early only the ol' man knew but all he ever said about it was that it had something to do with what they call German *Wirkungsgrad*. Many of the workers had come over from "the old country."

Rumor had it they had their way across paid for by the company in exchange for the opportunity to show up at 5:50 every morning, work 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. I think they call it indentured servitude. Or maybe slavery. Some of us were Americans through and through. Not that that meant they treated us any better.

No sooner is Vandervoort through the loading room door when the hulking German foreman, whose name he could never pronounce, let alone spell, waves his hand at Vandervoort requesting that he follow him into his cubbyhole office that always smelled of varnish and often bourbon. Portraits of executives long gone peer down on them, all sharing a similar semi-benevolent gaze.

I had long thought something was guarded in those whiskered portrait faces. Something they were hiding. Could be their considerable bank account balances.

The foreman told me to take a seat. Not a good sign. The taking of seats usually preceded the giving of pink slips. It might have been company policy—the sitting part.

With a distinct German accent, the foreman recounts recent Steinway & Sons history. Business had taken a turn for the worse.

Yeah, I knew that. Anybody paying attention knew that. According to the papers, the last fiscal year was the worst on record. With more expected to come. I didn't have any idea why. Maybe more people were taking up the violin than the piano. Easier to carry, cheaper, too.

In a conspiratorial-like muffled voice the foreman said, unfortunately, as much as they hate to, they have to let people go.

Hate to? Nah. They'd been doing that regularly over the past year. And they didn't appear too anguished about it either.

He tells me I'm an exemplary worker.

I thought I was an indispensable worker.

He tells me I was now an out-of-work worker. (Make that ex-worker.)

The foreman said again how much they hated to do this, as if that repetition was supposed to soften the blow, then further adds that when business picks up, I'll surely be called back. I'd seen others let go and never saw any of them again. Maybe they were back in Germany making sauerkraut or cuckoo clocks.

I guess I could have put up a stink or something, but what good would that have done? They certainly wouldn't put me back on the payroll because I complained. If anything, it would guarantee I wouldn't be back. Then too, he was a courteous man, this burly German, so I responded in like manner although the acid was already percolating in my stomach.

I had worked there for 6 years never missing a day, seldom complaining, always conscientious. Anyway, that's my take—the conscientious part.

In that immense brick building in the middle of busy Ditmars Street, in the middle of busy Brooklyn, men skilled in their craft, make pianos. Master craftsmen all. Not ordinary pianos, however. Steinway pianos. Vandervoort isn't one of those skilled in the ways of piano craftsmanship. He isn't an action maker, a plate rubber, an upright bellyman. He can't play a piano much less tune one.

What he does do is to create, repair, restore the tools and equipment the master craftsman need.

I was a humble millwright, as necessary for the final grand product as any man in the plant. I made the tools that made the pianos that made the music. If that's not indispensable, then whatever is?

Vandervoort is a born tinkerer. If a thing can come apart, he can dismantle it. If all goes well (it usually does) he can put it back together again. That's what he did. He installed, maintained, adjusted, or repaired any machine or piece of equipment that needed installing, maintaining, adjusting or repairing.

He has what people call mechanical aptitude.

True, I would have preferred musical aptitude, or athletic aptitude had I been given the choice but since I wasn't I made do with what I had—as everyman must.

I had even been singled out for my “remarkable mechanical ingenuity.” Not my words. I have that exact phrase in writing from the old man himself. From William Steinway.

Everyone who'd ever heard the name Steinway knows that Steinway & Sons stands for excellence, but perhaps excellence was a luxury the new age couldn't afford. At least that was how it appeared on that day—the day he I was told I was no longer needed ... wanted.

∞

By 6:30 Vandervoort is back home. Just about the time the birds are waking.

By 9 o'clock, Barnes, (Real name, Barney) his best friend/lodger/co-worker, comes in.

You too? Vandervoort asks not at all surprised.

I didn't think it would come to this.

Looks like.

Barnes avers they won't be off for long.

I didn't believe him. Barnes didn't really believe it either, but that's what friends tell friends—It's gonna be OK.

Barnes said neither of us could afford to stay out long. That I believed.

Maybe ol' man Steinway will step in to get us back, Barnes says. You anyway. He likes you, don't he? Said he did anyway. And you got that letter, didn't you?

In many ways, they couldn't be more dissimilar. Vandervoort is lanky; Barnes fireplug squat. Barnes is often seen with a disgusting stumpy cigar in his mouth; Vandervoort is never seen with any cigar, cigarette or pipe, disgusting or otherwise. Barnes often wears work coveralls even when not at work; Vandervoort never wears coveralls even when at work. Vandervoort had wanted to go to college; Barnes didn't want to finish high school.

Barnes is a carpenter, a proficient carpenter having learned his craft from his father who ran a small cabinet making business in lower Manhattan. But where his father made finely crafted furniture,

Barnes has neither the patience nor the eye for detail. At Steinway he builds shelves, cupboards, workbenches, anything else in the place that calls for a hammer or a saw. Except the pianos. Those he never touches. He isn't much for planning, but show him a drawing of something and he can build it accurately and quickly.

Although I didn't know it at the time, Barnes's carpentry skills would be critical for the life changing plans I would soon put in place.

In her room Moms sits in her homemade chair. She is worried. Of course she is. She has been house-bound for many years, having lost the use of her legs through some mysterious degenerative muscle disease their doctor had never been able to figure out.

Claudication was all the quack could come up with.

A few years earlier, Vandervoort had designed a chair on wheels. Barnes built it for her. It allowed her to get around the apartment on her own. Barnes made it from wood and wicker with big rear and tiny front wheels. It was Steinway piano wood strong. Although she scraped the paint on the door frames she at least had mobility. Either Barnes or Vandervoort helped her into the chair in the mornings. Since she couldn't easily get out on her own, she was usually in the chair all day.

Barnes never knew his mother. She died when he was but a few months old. So since he moved in with them and made her chair he had taken to also calling her Moms.

Yeah, I thought of him more as a brother than a boarder.

Don't worry, Moms, Barnes calls into her room. They can't get on without us. We'll be back soon. Before you know it.

Moms didn't answer. She knew.

two

About balancing the scales of destiny.

DEATH OF WILLIAM STEINWAY

Passed Away This Morning as a
Result of a Relapse.

HE WAS RAPIDLY RECOVERING

Had Been Ill for some time, but Took a
Decided Turn For the Better—End of an
Active and Useful Career—His Influence
Felt in Many Different Channels and His Life
Work a Part of New York's Later History.

William Steinway, the piano manufacturer,
died at 3:30 o'clock this morning at his
residence, 26 Gramercy Park, New York.
Death was due to Typhoid fever.

What happened the next day I can only put down to a balancing of the scales of destiny. Kismet.

During the early morning hours, William Steinway dies. He was 61, the inspired leader of the firm, the all-controlling force. Suffering from typhoid fever he had sunk into hallucinations brought on by injections of strychnine in an effort to stimulate the nervous system. At least so claimed the infallible *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

He was a brilliant man, Steinway. An inspirational man, an avuncular figure who roamed the workspaces in the plant with kind words. Encouragement for all.

And yes, he did like me. Thought I had a good mechanical mind. He even asked me once if I had ever thought of going to college to study engineering. I lied and said I preferred working for Steinway.

Two days later the police cordon off the street in front of the black-draped Steinway Hall as thousands turned out to show their respects. Vandervoort is was one of the men from Steinway & Sons in the four-hour long line filing past the coffin to look at the (ex) boss for the last time. At the head of his casket, palms, wreaths, hyacinths, make up an arrangement of a grand piano with a keyboard of blue-veined violets, white carnations.

After a tearful funeral oration, the doors are thrown open. With the still-employed Steinway & Sons piano workers Vandervoort escorts the casket in a column 8 deep. They are joined by over 100 carriages filled with mourners following the hearse out to Greenwood Cemetery where the boss's body is placed in the showy Steinway mausoleum.

I understood his death couldn't be good for the company. I understood that if they were in financial trouble then, worse was likely yet to come. Goodbye Steinway & Sons. I knew I would never know their likes again.

Don't worry, scoffs a former co-worker. We'll get through this. Vandervoort nods unconvincingly. Sure. You'll be back before you know it. Yeah.

Vandervoort knows that compared to workers in many other companies doing business in Brooklyn, Steinway employees were relatively contented. Still, he had heard the stories about labor

problems in the past, about the discontent of the workers because William Steinway had formed the Pianoforte Manufacturers' Society of New York in response to union demands.

We're with you, you know, says Little John, the president of their local Piano Makers Union chapter. We'll back you all the way. Get your job back. That's what we do. Fight for our members.

Yeah, good, Vandervoort says softly.

You know, I'm up for re-election next month and I could sure use your vote.

Yeah, OK.

I'll fight for you, Vandervoort. You can count on me ... if I'm still in office. You know that, Vandervoort, don't you? I'm on your side.

OK, yeah, good.

Little John, who wasn't little, wanders off singing, you've a friend in Little John, a friend for all the millwrights in all the ... mills. Right?

Yeah, right.

I never saw Little John again. He might as well have been in the coffin next to Steinway. Never heard from the union. What a surprise.

three

How the fateful decision was made.

TO AID THE UNEMPLOYED

Work of the Newly Organized Labor
Society

To the Editor of the Brooklyn Eagle:

Appeals in these hard times are nothing unusual and the charitable sentiment of the American public is too well-known to need any commentary. The distance between wealth and poverty is widening every day. The general depression of trade and the industries, as well as many other factors, have thrown thousands of able and industrious men into idleness and poverty. With these facts in view the Brooklyn Labor Society was founded for the object of finding work for the unemployed without regard to their religious beliefs, political opinion or nationality, and also to materially help poor persons or families really deserving charity.